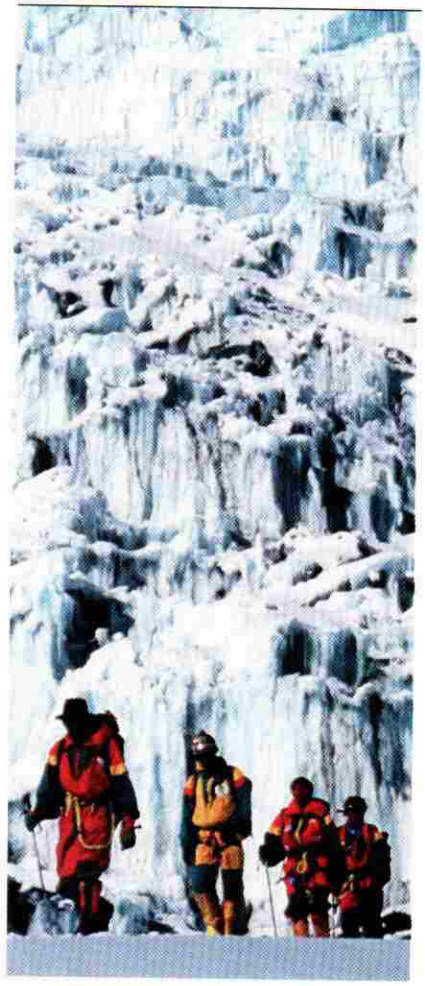

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The Himalayas are one of nature's most demanding classrooms, but they can teach us four important principles about taking charge of our followers – and our own egos.

The Leadership Lessons of Mount Everest

by Michael Useem

OUR TWIN OTTER was descending at a dangerously steep angle, but at the last minute the pilot managed to pull the nose up and ease us onto the runway. We had arrived at the gateway to the Himalayas – a tiny airstrip surrounded by snow-covered peaks in the village of Lukla, elevation 9,350 feet. With fully laden backpacks and a keen sense of adventure, we began our journey into the mountain range capped by Mount Everest.

We went to the Himalayas to learn about leadership in one of the outdoors' most stunning yet demanding classrooms. For the next 11 days, our team of 20 trekkers, including MBA graduates and midcareer executives, hiked some 80 miles over rough terrain to reach a high point of over 18,000 feet. Through our experiences along the way, we heightened our understanding of what true leadership is all about.

Of course, we didn't need to travel halfway around the world to appreciate the basic principles of leadership. All of us already recognized that leadership requires strategic thinking, decisive action, personal integrity, and other worthy qualities. Yet we also knew that converting such abstract concepts into practice is often an elusive process. Indeed, few behavioral concepts defy translation into reality as much as those that involve leadership.

We made the trip to Mount Everest not because it could teach us things about leadership that we couldn't have learned elsewhere but because the lessons there would have a far greater urgency. When problems arose, they could rapidly worsen – or be resolved –

depending on how quickly people put into action those theoretical leadership concepts. For the hundreds of trekkers who have attempted to reach the summit of Mount Everest, effective leadership has often literally meant the difference between life and death.

For us, hiking along the lower slopes, the decisions we would make would not have the same life-or-death consequences. Nevertheless, our journey would push us in untold ways. Most people in our group had no mountaineering experience whatsoever; many had never spent a single night camping in a tent. So hiking ten miles a day over tough landscape at high altitudes would test people as they had never been tested before. And although we planned to stay along the lower ridges of Mount Everest, we were well aware of the dangers of altitude sickness and careless mistakes – a bad slip could result in a sprained or broken ankle, a minor disaster in such a remote location.

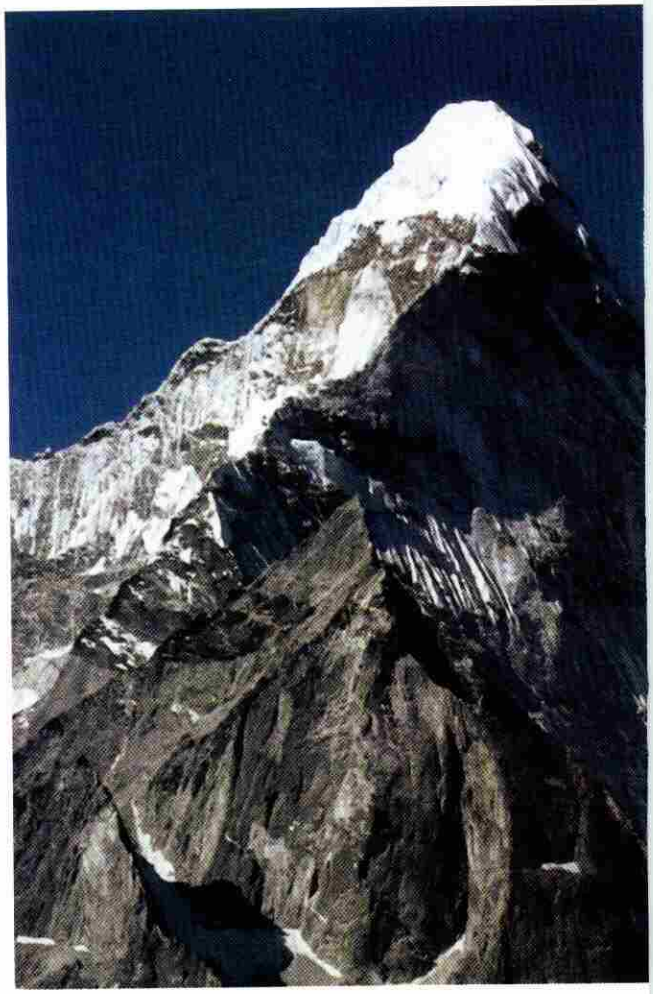
With our senses heightened to such risks, we would be more receptive to the leadership lessons we would learn. Specifically, over the course of our journey, four essential principles emerged: Leaders should be led by the group's needs; inaction can sometimes be the most difficult–but wisest–action; if your words don't stick, you haven't spoken; and leading upwards can feel wrong when it's right.

From Gettysburg to Everest

Before we look at the lessons in more detail, first a word about the genesis of the Mount Everest program. The impetus for the expeditions dates to the early 1990s. At the time, recruiters from investment banks, consulting firms, and other companies said that they liked the functional skills of Wharton graduates, but they also wanted those newly minted managers to be able to lead. Their markets were far too unpredictable and fast moving for anything less. But teaching leadership in the classroom was one thing; actually implementing those skills in the workplace was quite another.

To help fill that gap, I began creating off-site experiences intended to enhance our graduates' understanding of leadership. The first was a one-day program in which our executive MBA students walked the Gettysburg battlefield and discussed the leadership lessons of that pivotal struggle more than a century ago. The Himalayas presented another, more powerful venue for the same kind of inductive learning. Not only could participants benefit from the historical expeditions of others, they could also learn from their own unfolding experiences.

So four years ago, my associate Edwin Bernbaum, the director of the Sacred Mountains Program at the Mountain Institute, and I launched an annual program that is open to our MBA and executive MBA graduates, as well as to managers who have completed one of our executive programs. Each participant can bring along a guest, perhaps a spouse or coworker, with the proviso that everyone is a student and must take part in all activities. A typical group consists of some 20 men and women, ranging in age from their 20s to their 50s. For months before arriving in Nepal, participants work themselves into the best physical shape possible, exercising aerobically five or six days a week, often on a hilly trail, a treadmill, or StairMaster. Some have even hired personal trainers to prepare for the journey.



PHOTOGRAPHY: MICHAEL USEEM

During the treks (this article draws on four of them), we explored the leadership terrain through three methods that continually reinforced one another, often in unexpected ways. First, we held daily seminars over lunch and dinner, drawing on preassigned materials, including books, articles, and cases of the past triumphs and disasters of mountaineers who have attempted to reach the Himalayas' uppermost ridges. Second, every day two participants took their turn as leaders, assuming responsibility for the day's hiking assignments, logistical issues, and seminar topics. The day leaders also handled personnel problems ranging from irritation to illness. Each night, the entire group held a discussion to learn from everyone's experiences, analyzing the tribulations

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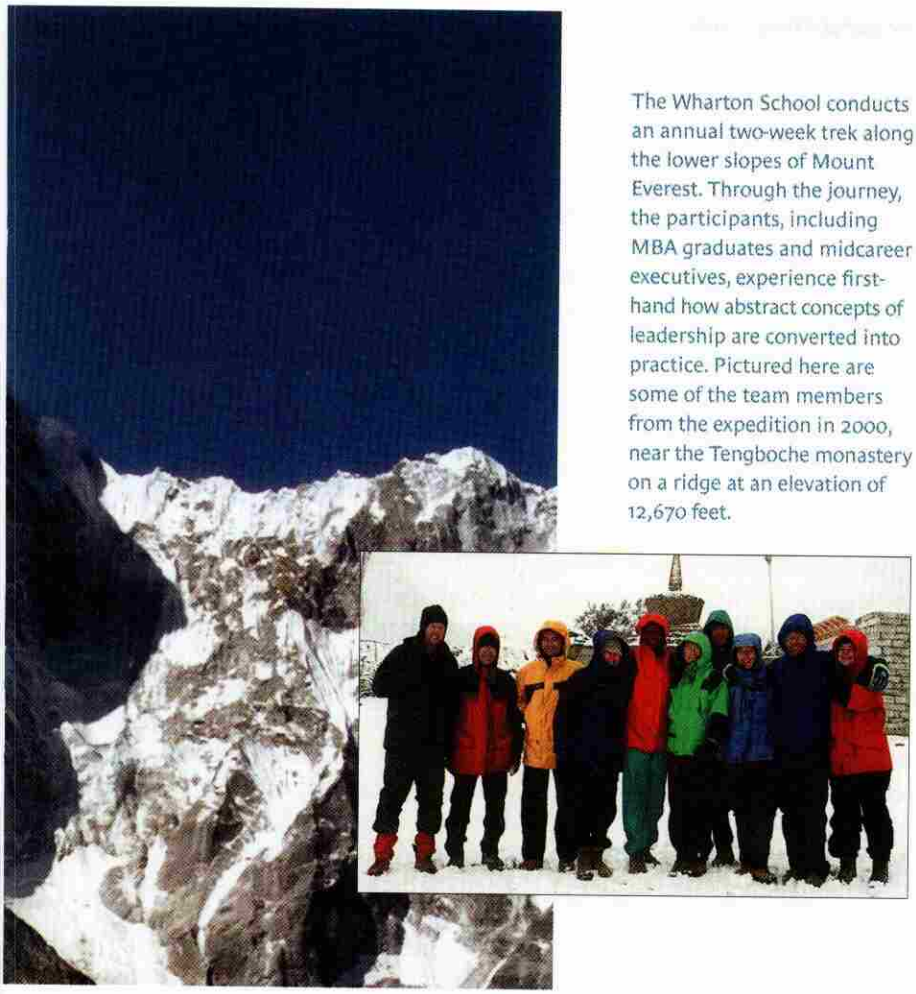

The Wharton School conducts an annual two-week trek along the lower slopes of Mount Everest. Through the journey, the participants, including MBA graduates and midcareer executives, experience firsthand how abstract concepts of leadership are converted into practice. Pictured here are some of the team members from the expedition in 2000, near the Tengboche monastery on a ridge at an elevation of 12,670 feet.

we had faced and miscalculations we had made. Third, as we hiked the path toward the base camp of Mount Everest, we encountered climbers who just days earlier had themselves been on its highest slopes or even its summit. We learned from their firsthand accounts, especially when they talked frankly about the mistakes they had made and the things they would have done differently.

Now to the lessons themselves.

Lesson 1

Leaders Should Be Led by the Group's Needs

On the first day of our journey, we departed from Lukla by midmorning, wending our way along village homes, terraced fields, and valley walls. The trail, which was the sole path to Mount Everest from our direction, was so steep and narrow along its many miles that hikers, porters, and yaks had to carry all gear and provisions required for the journey. By late afternoon, we arrived at our campsite, nestled in a deep valley with a roaring stream nearby and icy peaks above.

That evening, we presented shirts emblazoned with a trek logo to each of the 25 Sherpas who would be our trail guides and yak herders in the days ahead. The act was more than just a token gesture. Each of us was now part of a team, and the success of our expedition would depend greatly on how well we worked with one another. Often, that would mean subjugating one's own needs to those of the group, and we discussed how it was especially important that leaders not let their own interests cloud their judgment when making decisions that would ultimately affect everyone.

Several days later, this principle was brought home to me in a very personal way. An American whom we had met on the trail walked into our campsite at dusk. We had pitched our tents far above the timberline at 14,150 feet, the highest campsite of the trip. Our unexpected visitor reported that her brother was showing the classic symptoms of altitude sickness: nausea, dizziness, and an uncertain gait. If untreated, we knew it could become fatal, but the only sure treatment was to walk him down to a far lower altitude. That would have been harrowing, however, since night was falling and the descent with the stricken hiker would take hours.

Fortunately, our physician for the trek, a graduate of our executive MBA program who specialized in emergency medicine, had packed a full load of medicine. She advised treating the suffering trekker and placing him on an hourly watch to ensure that his symptoms did not worsen during the night. She anticipated that with the early light of dawn, he would be able to walk himself safely down to a lower altitude.

The unexpected encounter raised several conflicting concerns. First, the brother and sister were the children of one of my colleagues at Wharton. Because of that connection, I felt compelled to walk down with the ailing trekker that night to be absolutely sure that his condition didn't deteriorate. But second, I was also responsible for the well-being of my own group, and I knew I had to keep that responsibility uppermost in mind. And third, I was myself exhausted by the day's doings, and the last thing I was fit for at that moment was a long nighttime descent. After weighing these competing considerations, I made up my mind to follow our physician's advice, but if the hiker's health declined during the night, I would make the difficult descent with him.

Fortunately, our doctor had it right: The young man weathered the night, and the next morning he was able to walk himself down to a safer altitude. Several days later, we found him fully recovered

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in the thicker air of the region's main trading village at 11,300 feet. The incident strengthened my own resolve to keep personal interests from taking precedence over what was best for all.

This concept was reinforced each day of the journey. As our trekkers took turns being leaders for the day, they gained a deeper appreciation of how difficult it can be to put the needs of the group first. Like everyone else, the leaders for the day arrived late in the afternoon at our camp, dog-tired, famished, and sometimes chilled. Their primary responsibility, however, was to ensure that everybody arrived safely, and they had to tend to the immediate needs of others before addressing their own. Placing team needs ahead of one's own can be an abstract concept, but it is put to a primal test when a person is hungry, tired, and cranky. Being the last to eat and the last to sleep helped drive this lesson home. Each of us had to rise to the occasion no matter how miserable we might have felt.

In business, executives and managers are frequently tempted to put their own careers first. They may let their egos cloud their thinking or find convenient ways to rationalize decisions that are based purely on their own interests. They may also lose sight of the needs of their teams, bending over backwards to please their bosses or single-mindedly focusing on shareholder demands. Ultimately, though, much of the strength of an organization depends on leaders who are concerned with doing what is best for their followers.

When leaders truly serve and subordinate their private welfare to that of all others, their authority often becomes unquestionable.

Days later, that lesson was driven home in an unexpected way when we reached a monastery that is home to the spiritual leader for the region's largely Buddhist population. By arrangement, we were able to receive a private audience with the high monk, the reincarnate lama. With the aid of interpreters, we engaged in a freewheeling discussion of Buddhist concepts of leadership. The high monk left us with two indelible affirmations. First, leadership is built by serving. Second, when leaders truly serve and subordinate their private welfare to that of all others, their authority often becomes unquestionable.

Lesson 2

Inaction Can Sometimes Be the Most Difficult – But Wisest – Action

As darkness descended on our high campsite at 14,150 feet – higher than the summit of Colorado's Pikes Peak – our discussion focused on the next day's big event. We were to rise at 2 AM to depart for a long hike to the highest point of our trek, a rocky crag called Chukhung Ri some three and a half miles above sea level. The climb required no ropes, but we knew it would demand strength of will: The distance would be daunting and the air thin. Each of us was privately wondering if we had what it would take – not only to reach the summit but, more important, to back away if the circumstances dictated.

Pondering that issue, we turned our discussion to Arlene Blum, who led an all-women's expedition to climb Annapurna, considered one of the most dangerous peaks in the Himalayas. In the mid-1970s, Blum had tried to join other expeditions but was denied membership because her presence would allegedly undercut the male camaraderie deemed so important for success. So she decided to organize her own team of ten women to reach the summit of the 26,545-foot mountain, the world's tenth highest.

Blum recruited well: Each of her climbers was a world-class mountaineer with a fierce determination to reach the summit. But even if everything went well, not all of them would make it to the top. Expedition mountaineering requires a massive team effort to

establish a route and move supplies up the mountain so that on the final day a small group can make the ultimate push to the top. If just one person reaches the summit, all members bask in the glory of that success. This stands in sharp contrast to the recent advent of commercial mountaineering, whose goal is to place all the paying clients on the summit, with success credited only to those who actually stand on top.

On October 15, 1978, after an arduous push from a high camp, two of Blum's team made it to the summit. It was a crowning moment for the group, for women, and for mountaineering: The whole world had been waiting to see if Blum's expedition could equal the accomplishment of the all-men's French team that had been the first to ascend Annapurna in 1950.

A day later, however, two other members of Blum's expedition wanted to reach the summit themselves. At first Blum resisted because her team had already achieved its objective of placing at least one member on top, and the expedition would gain little if others repeated that feat. But the two climbers insisted they be given a chance. Finally, Blum relented. Two days later, the bodies of the two mountaineers were found below the summit, evidence pointing to a fatal fall.

Without a driving urge to succeed, Blum's team would not have been able to move the supplies up the mountain, and the first two climbers would likely have had to stop short of their goal. But the team also needed an equally keen awareness of risk among all of its members. The second two climbers pushed that envelope too far, forever marring what would otherwise have been a brilliant accomplishment.

As we turned to our own challenge for the next day, our discussion revolved around the same two polar concerns. Many of us were eager to climb to the highest possible point, and we knew that would require all the mental and physical reserves we could summon. At the same time, we told ourselves that without an objective appraisal of our own limitations and of the potential perils of the hike, we ran the risk of allowing our desire to reach that goal to recklessly overwhelm our good judgment, possibly endangering ourselves and others.

Tempering the desire for action in business is likewise difficult. Many executives have been promoted precisely because of their instinct for decisive action. They have been rewarded for being able to pull the trigger when others can't, to fund a risky but potentially lucrative project, or to fire an underperforming manager. Often, though, doing nothing is the wisest course if the alternative is to act precipitously. And not only must leaders keep an eye on themselves, they must also dissuade others from rash decisions.

The next day's hike promised a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to view the Himalayas from a spectacular vantage point. But the risks were significant: a long, rocky, steep trail with several particularly demanding stretches. With that information in hand, several in our party wisely decided that they would not attempt to reach the high point. Instead, they would accompany us for only part of the hike, stopping on a ridge at 17,000 feet.

At 3:00 the next morning, we started off across the dark terrain, our headlamps bobbing along the trail, giving the appearance of a pearl necklace snaking its way up the mountainside. Those who had decided against trying to reach the high point arrived at the 17,000-foot turnaround location by midmorning and returned safely back to camp by midafternoon.

The rest of us pushed farther up to the high point of 18,238 feet on Chukhung Ri, arriving by noon at one of the most stunning vistas in the world. Gigantic glaciers flowed below on both sides, huge peaks soared in front, and a mammoth ice wall of the world's third highest mountain rose just behind. As we emerged from the total concentration of climbing to finally look around, we marveled in silence at the majestic view.

Later, a few people who had initially underestimated their abilities to reach that summit but were encouraged by their teammates to try for it remarked on how grateful they were to have been pushed beyond what they thought they were capable of. They had gained a firsthand appreciation for the role that others can play in helping people overcome their personal doubts and fears to fulfill their potential.

But for those who are instinctive risk takers, as most leaders are, tempering that inclination can be extremely difficult. A few days earlier, as we were heading for our high camp, one person in the group became dizzy and disoriented. Even so, he insisted that he was fine, and others encouraged him to go on. Later, his altitude sickness worsened. Still, he continued to believe that he could make it. The chief executive of a small industrial company, he was not used to sitting on the sidelines. But others on the team had become worried about his safety. Finally, after a long discussion with a group of us, he agreed that he should turn back with one of the guides and rejoin us when we returned to a lower elevation. The conversation leading up to that decision was difficult and time consuming, but I believe that everyone involved learned from it. For me, it reinforced the idea that although leaders need to help people go for the highest achievement of which they are capable, they must also be keenly aware of the hazards ahead and take the necessary – and sometimes unappealing – steps to avert too grave a risk.

Lesson 3

If Your Words Don't Stick, You Haven't Spoken

Upon our return from Chukhung Ri to the high camp, we were elated by our sense of victory, if utterly spent by the price of achieving it. Many knew that the 18,238-foot summit would most likely be the highest point on which they would ever stand.

The next day had been set aside to give people time to recover. Some worked

on their diaries; others opted to do nothing. But several in the group hiked to nearby vistas, such as a lake on the slopes of Ama Dablam, a Matterhorn-like spire jutting above us. I, along with four hikers and two guides, decided to walk toward the base camp of Mount Everest.

By early afternoon, we reached a tiny settlement called Lobuche, perched alongside the enormous Khumbu glacier upon which the camp is located. After a brief rest, we decided to return to our own camp by crossing the glacier, a mile-wide jumble of loose rock and precipitous slopes. The hike across proved very tedious, and we were still on the trail when everyone else was back at camp at 6 PM, the scheduled time for dinner. Alarmed by the possibility of an injury or worse, the day leaders at our camp dispatched a group of Sherpas with hot tea to find us before dark. We met them just 30 minutes from camp and were back before dinner was over.

At first, people were greatly relieved that we had returned safely, but after confirming that we were all fine, their mood changed to anger. Several criticized me for not communicating my plans better. "We didn't know where you were," one said. "We needed more information about what might have been causing your delay. Without that, it was difficult to decide whether to send a rescue party or to wait."

Initially, I was defensive. When I had left that morning, I had firm plans in mind, and I thought I had communicated them to several others over breakfast. But now I realized that I must have just casually mentioned the possibility of crossing the Khumbu glacier because nobody could recall my mention of it by the time they realized we were missing. And, more important, I had not stated clearly that they shouldn't worry if we weren't back by 6 PM, since crossing the glacier might make us late for dinner. Unwittingly, I had become a textbook example of how *not* to communicate.

In trying to rectify the situation, the worst thing I could have done would have been to downplay my errors, which would have sent the wrong message about how we all needed to communicate. To make sure I didn't do that, I explicitly reviewed what I should have done, and I apologized to everyone for the mistakes I had made. Regardless of what had been said during breakfast, I was ultimately responsible for making sure that the day leaders knew about my plans. My failure to do so not only caused our team to become unnecessarily alarmed, it also resulted in unnecessary work for our Sherpa guides.

When leaders make their strategic intent abundantly clear, others know what to do without requiring myriad further instructions.

Business managers often make the same mistake, failing to grasp the crucial distinction between telling people something and delivering that information so that it really sticks. Indeed, poor communication is one reason why many companies that have devised brilliant strategies fail miserably in executing them. When leaders make their strategic intent abundantly clear – as Wal-Mart's management has in proclaiming its strategy of "low prices, every day"–employees know what to do without requiring myriad further instructions. Achieving that clarity, however, is often far more difficult than managers appreciate.

Although my missteps did not have dire consequences for our group, poor communication did lead to disastrous events on Mount Everest on May 10, 1996. On that ill-fated day, described in the best-seller *Into Thin Air,* a freak blizzard caught dozens of hikers near the summit, killing eight.

During the weeks of preparation for their trek, commercial team leaders Rob Hall and Scott Fischer repeatedly told their clients about the "two o'clock rule." On the day they would attempt to reach the summit, they would have to do so by 2 PM; otherwise they'd have to turn around even if they were within sight of the top. The rationale was clear: Climbers needed time to descend and reach the high camp before nightfall, where the relative security of their tents, sleeping bags, and oxygen could protect them. If they failed to reach camp by dark, they could die on the exposed ridge where windchills can plunge to 100 degrees below zero.

Although Hall and Fischer repeatedly emphasized the two o'clock rule, they evidently failed to do so persuasively. Many of the 33 climbers who had left the high camp just after midnight on May 10 were still pressing for the summit after 2 PM, and Hall and Fischer themselves did not reach the top until well after that time. The consequences were tragic. After 5 PM, when all the climbers should have been crawling into their life-protecting tents back at the high camp, a violent storm hit the mountain and killed five climbers in the party (and three others on the Tibetan side of Mount Everest) caught in the open, including both Hall and Fischer.

Lesson 4

Leading Upwards Can Feel Wrong When It's Right

One of the most magnificent settings of our trek was Tengboche, a ridge at 12,670 feet that is the home of the region's best-known monastery. With a commanding view of Mount Everest, Tengboche has long been a stopping point for virtually everyone on their way to Everest.

It was at this location that the final, equally powerful lesson was driven home. We had been debating the events of *Into Thin Air,* and among our questions was whether one of the commercial clients, Beck Weathers, might have averted the disaster that nearly resulted in his death. On his way up the summit ridge, Weathers became temporarily blind, and his team leader, Rob Hall, instructed him to stay put until Hall returned from the summit to lead him safely down to the high camp.

But Weathers failed to ask Hall to elaborate on his terse instruction, and as a result Weathers spent the entire day waiting for his leader to return. Caught in the killer storm later that afternoon, Hall never did come down, and Weathers's resulting delay in descending left him badly exposed when the storm hit. After he lost consciousness, others left him for dead. He somehow survived the storm but suffered grievous frostbite on his hands and face. In retrospect, had Weathers pressed Hall, his superior on the expedition, for more information, they could have developed a contingency plan: If Hall wasn't back by an agreed-upon time, then Weathers should head down with another guide or teammate.

After much discussion about Weathers, our ongoing debate was aided by a serendipitous encounter. Along the Tengboche ridge, we happened to meet another of the principals who had miraculously survived the 1996 disaster, Sandy Hill Pittman. She and Weathers had been among the many clients who had left the high camp at 26,000 feet just past midnight on May 10. Having already debated the events of that fateful day, and with the summit of Mount Everest on our horizon, we asked Pittman if there was anything she would have done differently. Her response was unexpected.

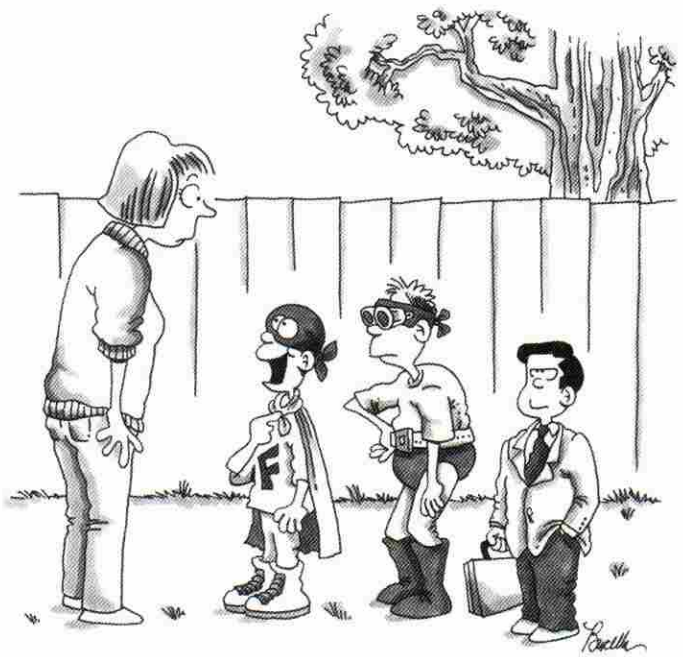
Pittman's guide, Scott Fischer, had moved slowly toward the summit during the early morning hours of May 10. She had recognized that he was off his game, but she said nothing as they headed for the summit. She was too focused on her own ascent and too confident in Fischer to worry about his condition. Later that day, however, as the storm enveloped the mountain, Fischer sat down on the way back and never stood up.

Pittman told us that she wished she had done more to help him. Earlier on their expedition, Fischer had insisted that his clients build teamwork among themselves to ensure that they would assist one another during a crisis, and his demand proved lifesaving for Pittman, who was rescued from the storm by her team members. But she had not done enough for Fischer. His leadership had saved her life, she said, but hers had fallen short in saving his.

Pittman's frank assessment of her actions helped bring home the notion that leadership is not just about mobilizing those below; it's also about marshaling the people above. After all, everyone is fallible, and even the most experienced CEOs and other top executives have blind spots. Our responsibility, then, is to help them avoid the pitfalls that they haven't seen. Of course, leading upwards often feels wrong because of the hierarchical culture prevalent in most companies, and it requires tremendous diplomacy and tact to avoid a political blunder that can derail or end a promising career. At the same time, many great companies have foundered because of faulty decisions made at the top while middle managers sat on their hands. The harrowing experience of Weathers and Pittman – and the difference that upward leadership might have made for them and for Scott Fischer that day – stands as a forceful reminder for keeping this leadership principle in mind. In effect, we all need to be ready to lead even when we are not in charge.

At the end of our journey, we spent our final evening together in Kathmandu, recapping the various things we learned, both from our achievements and from our mistakes. We were tanner and fitter – and noticeably thinner – than we were when we first arrived in Nepal two weeks earlier. We were also more aware that good leadership requires many capabilities and actions, and we had a deeper, fuller appreciation of what it really takes to lead.

During our trek, we had hiked some 40,000 vertical feet, and we had gazed upon four of the world's six highest summits. Humbled by our own experiences and by those of other trekkers in the Himalayas, we realized more than ever that mastering leadership is an ongoing journey. Indeed, as difficult as our hike up the lower slopes of Mount Everest was, the harder work would commence as we applied the principles of good leadership to our management responsibilities in the years ahead.



"I have the power to fly, Jimmy has the power to see through things, and Larry has the power of attorney."

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